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"The End of Immortality!" Eternal Life and the Makropulos Debate

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Abstract Responding to a well-known essay by Bernard Williams, philosophers (and a few theologians) have engaged in what I call "the Makropulos debate," a debate over whether immortality—"living forever"—would be desirable for beings like us. Lacking a firm conceptual grounding in the religious contexts from which terms such as "immortality" and "eternal life" gain much of their sense, the debate has consisted chiefly in a battle of speculative fantasies. Having presented my four main reasons for this assessment, I examine an alternative and neglected conception, the idea of eternal life as a present possession, derived in large part from Johannine Christianity. Without claiming to argue for the truth of this conception, I present its investigation as exemplifying a conceptually fruitful direction of inquiry into immortality or eternal life, one which takes seriously the religious and ethical surroundings of these concepts.

Keywords Christian theology · Eternal life · Immortality · Makropulos case

Eternal life! Now people will be looking for it for ever. Perhaps we had it here.
(Vítek, in Čapek 1999 [1922]: Act Four).

1 Introduction

Widely celebrated as a philosophical classic, Bernard Williams' essay "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" (Williams 1973) sparked a debate among philosophers and theologians that has run and run.[1] As

[1] Initially delivered as a lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1972, Williams' essay has been much anthologized since its first publication; see, e.g., Fischer (1993: Chapter 5), Donnelly (1994: Chapter 9), Benatar (2010: Chapter 21). For the claim that it is a "classic," see, e.g., Solomon (2008: 80 n. 4), Fischer (2009: 164 n. 34), Clack (2014: 162 fn. 60).

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many readers of the present article will know, Williams draws upon the fictional case of Elina Makropulos to illustrate his contention that a life such as hers—and, by extension, any extraordinarily longevous life—would not, indeed could not, avoid becoming anything other than insufferably tedious. The fictional story itself, originally composed as a play by Čapek (1999 [1922]) and subsequently adapted as an opera by Janáček (1989 [1925]), portrays Emilia Marty (formerly known as Elina Makropulos and by several other names with the initials "EM") as a woman who, having lived to the age of 337 (in Čapek's version) or 342 (in Janáček's) as the result of drinking an experimental potion supplied by her father three centuries earlier, is faced with the choice of whether to seek out the potion's formula and imbibe another draught, or to admit that she has exhausted all that life has to offer. Ultimately, having retrieved the document containing the formula, she voluntarily relinquishes it and laughs as a young woman, Kristina, sets it alight with a candle: "Haha," Emilia quips, "the end of immortality!" (Čapek 1999 [1922]: 259), and the curtain descends.[2]

Central to the debate prompted by Williams' essay is a disagreement about the contingency or non-contingency of certain features of human beings. Both sides concur that it is a merely contingent fact that we are mortal, for they each take the debate to be not strictly about whether it would be desirable to live for 300 years or so and then perhaps for another three hundred beyond that, but rather about whether a human life—or, at any rate, a life that is recognizably human-like—would be desirable if it were to go on "forever." What the parties disagree over is whether human beings have capacities that could sustain the interest and agreeableness of such a life. Williams maintains that our deepest, "categorical," desires are what motivate us to devise and pursue the projects that furnish our lives with meaning and value, and yet these desires, being finite in number, would inevitably run out at some point. His opponents, by contrast, enthusiastically adduce various human characteristics that, in their imaginings, would facilitate unending contentment. These characteristics include: our ability to enjoy "repeatable pleasures" such as those of consuming good food and drink, and making love (Fischer 1994); the tendency of desires to revive themselves after periods of quiescence (Wisniewski 2005); the impermanence of human memory, enabling us to forget earlier experiences and hence savor undergoing them time after time; and the ingenious knack that we have of concocting new activities and paths in life to stave off boredom. (Bruckner 2012) Thus, on the one side are those who insist that the human lifespan is about right as it is; perhaps a few more decades would be advantageous for most of us, but much beyond that would, necessarily, become intolerably dull. On the other side are those who ardently declare: "Not at all! Give us more! Not only could we endure it: we would thrive!"

[2] Some might discern in the name "Kristina" (often abbreviated in the play to "Kristy," especially by her father, Vítek) an allusion to a redeeming figure—someone who "saves" us, not by *giving* us everlasting life but, ironically, by destroying its possibility.

It is, to put it mildly, difficult to see how a disagreement such as this could be resolved, not least because the arguments on both sides rest on little more than fantasizing. As I have argued elsewhere, the whole debate lacks a coherent footing. (Burley 2009) Not only do the majority of contributors make no effort to ground the concepts of immortality or eternal life in the religious contexts from which they gain the preponderance of the sense that they have, but in some instances these contexts are casually, and deliberately, set aside. What we are left with is, for the most part, a philosophers' game of trading loose speculations tenuously supported by underdescribed thought experiments.

My purpose in this article is twofold. First I want to reiterate and reemphasize my reasons for regarding the Makropulos debate as being on a road to nowhere, and to defend those reasons against some objections that have been raised. Second, I want to explore some aspects of what I consider to be a philosophically thought-provoking, though admittedly somewhat elusive, conception of eternal life, which has been largely neglected both in the literature surrounding the Makropulos debate and in the philosophy of religion. The conception in question is, in brief, that of eternal life as a present possession, as a characteristic of the life that each of us is living here and now, and which, according to a number of theologians especially in Christian traditions, can be accentuated or heightened through the cultivation of faith. On account of its rootedness in Christian theological discourse, this conception of eternal life cannot be transposed into a predominantly or exclusively secular philosophical debate. I shall not, therefore, argue that the conception offers any straightforward contribution to the Makropulos debate; rather, my purpose in discussing it here is to provide one example of how theological resources can be utilized in order to facilitate more conceptually nuanced and ethically insightful reflections on immortality or eternal life than the Makropulos debate has tended to yield.

2 Conceptual Problems with the Makropulos Debate[3]

Participants in the Makropulos debate have, on the whole, framed it as a debate over whether immortality is desirable for beings like us.[4] An initial problem with this can be expressed in the form of the following dilemma. Evaluating the desirability of an imaginary life requires imagining what that life would be like. In the case of imagining a purportedly immortal life, either we must imagine what it would be like for us in a world much like the one we know or we must imagine what it would be like in an entirely different world. Choosing the first option results in failing to imagine immortality at all, since any world much like our own could not be one in which we are immortal; the whole of nature would have to be dramatically transformed. Choosing the second option, meanwhile, results in a drift into fantasy,

[3] This section recapitulates, and develops in certain respects, material from Burley (2009).

[4] That the debate has, on the whole, been framed in terms of "immortality" rather than mere life extension is evident from the very titles of many contributions, indicative instances being Fischer (1994), Wisniewski (2005), Chappell (2009), and of course Williams' original essay (Williams 1973).

from which no useful conclusions can be drawn; this is because, as Kathleen Wilkes has poignantly put it in a slightly different though related context, "in a world indeterminately different we do not know what we would want to say about anything." (Wilkes 1988: 46) Let us call this the *dilemma of fantastical thought experiments*. There is a sense in which each of the subsequent problems below elaborates this one with a different inflection or emphasis, so I shall move on to those others.

A second problem with evaluating the desirability of immortality—and thus a second problem with the Makropulos debate as a whole—is that any clear judgment about the desirability of a life requires, minimally, the possibility of conceiving of that life in its entirety, rather than only some portions of it. But, with the possible exception of some mathematical contexts, it makes no sense to speak of completed infinite series. While sense can be made of a *potentially* infinite series—and hence of a process that could, in principle, continue without end—there is nothing that could count as an infinite series that has reached completion. Therefore, *a fortiori*, there is nothing that could count as conceiving of an endless life as a whole. Let us call this the *inconceivability of completed infinities.*

One immediate objection to this latter contention of mine might involve invoking the idea of *beginningless* series. For example, in conceptions of reincarnation or rebirth deriving from India—such as those in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions—the series of lives undergone by any given individual is commonly said to be without beginning.[5] We might then infer that what is being conceptualized is a series that, being already infinite in extent (and having the present moment as a stipulated endpoint), does indeed constitute a completed infinity. I am willing to concede that one could describe the beginningless series of rebirths as a completed infinity if one so wishes. But the important point is that, nonetheless, nothing could count as conceiving of that series *in its entirety*, since by definition it has no beginning—and perhaps no ultimate end either.[6] Thus, although it is believed by Buddhists that the Buddha himself, on the night of his spiritual awakening, acquired knowledge of his previous lives, this could—if those lives are beginningless—mean only that he gained the ability to trace the series of lives back in time and that there would never come a point at which he was unable to trace it back further.

Pertinent in this context is the fact that also attributed to the Buddha is the claim that the origins of the cosmos and the precise workings of *kamma* (karma/action), which generates the connections between successive lives, are among the "inconceivable" (*acinteyya*) matters, speculating about which is liable to lead to "either madness or frustration." (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* 2.80, trans. Bodhi 2012: 463) Such cautionary remarks should perhaps deter us from supposing that the point of describing the Buddha as one who knows all his former lives (and those of other beings as well) resides in his then being able to communicate this information to others. It would appear, rather, that a significant part of the point is to indicate the

[5] See, e.g., Sharma (1986: 157), Collins (1998: 168, 249), Jaini (2000: 220, 294).

[6] It remains a matter of dispute within and between certain Indian derived traditions whether *samsāra*—the series of life, death, and rebirth—does or does not have a final end. For relevant remarks, see Minor (1986: 33), Thrangu (2006: 5–6), Yen (2006: 42).

Buddha's superlative level of intellectual, spiritual, and ethical attainment, a level which, though to be aspired to by all, lies far beyond the present possibilities of the majority of his followers. He is portrayed as knowing everything there is to know about living wisely, including those things that exceed our powers of comprehension. There is, therefore, no simple validation for the idea of conceiving of a completed infinite series to be derived from Buddhist teachings, or from other traditions originating in South Asia. While endorsing the suggestion that if fruitful rather than vapid discussion is to be had about immortality and eternal life it is precisely to religious conceptions that we ought to turn, including those involving rebirth, I should add that these discussions are prone to slide again into vapidity if dislocated from the religious and cultural environments from which they acquire their sense.[7]

A further response to my contention about the inconceivability of completed infinite series has been made by John Martin Fischer, who, while accepting that such series are indeed inconceivable, proposes that it is not necessary to conceive of an immortal life as a whole in order to properly evaluate its desirability; this is not necessary, Fischer maintains, because for the immortal life to be evaluated it is sufficient to evaluate any of its finite portions. More specifically, we can consider an immortal life at any particular moment in its trajectory and assess whether the life up to that moment is desirable, and we can go on doing this for any (finite) length of the life in question. "Given that we can so evaluate an immortal life with respect to any given time," Fischer concludes, "it seems perfectly reasonable to suppose that this is enough to defuse the worry." (Fischer 2013: 349)

The puzzling thing about this response is that Fischer should regard it as doing anything other than conceding precisely the point I am making. My point is that the most that can be conceived of in this context is a life of some finite duration. However long that duration might be, it remains infinitely remote from the putative idea of an endless life. Evidently, Fischer wants to take issue with my claim that evaluating the desirability of a life requires the ability, at least in principle, to evaluate—and hence to conceive of—the life as a whole. But I do not see how the response he provides comes even close to defusing the worry that this ability is necessary.

To reemphasize my point: evaluating the desirability of a life is a matter of evaluating how the life goes, and determining how the life goes depends on having a conception of the life as a whole. I am not suggesting that it requires our having a richly imagined narrative comprising every detail of the life; I am suggesting merely that it requires our being able to build up a fully rounded picture of the overall course of the life, the details of which could in principle be filled in to a point where we are satisfied that we have enough upon which to base a well-informed judgment. The problem with a purportedly endless life is that we could go on acquiring more information indefinitely, and still the life would infinitely outstrip our picture of it. We could never even begin to form a picture of how the life as a whole goes. The problem is not a merely practical one. It is not that conceiving such a life in its

[7] For some of my own work on conceptions of rebirth and their ethical ramifications, see Burley (2013a, b, 2014, 2016).

entirety is, as a contingent matter of fact, extremely difficult to do; it is that it makes no sense to speak of an endless life "in its entirety."[8] Seeking to envisage how an unending life goes is to seek a chimera; therefore, necessarily, one can never be in a position to evaluate the desirability of such a life. Evaluating *finite* lives, of any duration, is an incommensurate project.

A third problem with the Makropulos debate is that its contributors often ignore distinctions between different kinds of immortality—between, for example, a life that is supposed to be necessarily immortal and one that is supposed to be contingently immortal, a distinction that was introduced by Hunter Steele (1976) but has received little subsequent attention.[9] As I have previously argued, conceptual incoherence attaches to each of these varieties of supposed immortality, but making the distinction enables us to see more clearly what sort of incoherence arises. (Burley 2009: 541–543) Let us, then, call this the *lack of distinctions problem*.

Since I previously raised this issue, some effort has been given to differentiating alternative models of immortality. For instance, Cave (2013) distinguishes between "medical immortals" and "true immortals." Medical immortals would be people who do not undergo the process of aging but are not immune from injury. So in view of "all the things that could go wrong, from a piano falling on their head to the heat death of the universe, the medical immortal would not therefore be faced with a truly infinite future." (Cave 2013: 286) This is comparable to what Steele means by "contingent body-bound immortality": such an immortal would, like ordinary human beings, be "subject to the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to" and "would always have the option of ending his own potentially eternal existence if he decided he had had enough." (Steele 1976: 426–427) Meanwhile, Cave's true immortal, as with Steele's possessor of necessary immortality, would not be able to die regardless of anything that happens. "[S]uch a person," Cave proposes, "really would be confronted with … an unending future." (2013: 287; cf. Steele 1976: 426) Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014) adopt Cave's distinction and then add a third variety, which they dub "robust immortality." "We might conceive of a robustly immortal individual," they write, "as a medically immortal individual with an incredibly felicitous (and never-ending) actual life path. This individual can die, but she never will die because, as things actually turn out, no mortal harms will ever beset her." (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin 2014: 368)

The difficulties that Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin see with the kinds of immortality they identify are practical rather than conceptual. While admitting that it would be "an imaginative stretch to suppose that human beings could someday achieve medical immortality" and that "it is just not at all plausible that we could achieve true immortality (in this world)" (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin 2014: 371), they remain confident that they and their readers know very well what they are talking

[8] It is thus to understate the problem to say merely that "We cannot *clearly* imagine immortality" (Rosati 2013: 359; my emphasis), for this implies that we can, or might be able to, form at least a rough conception of what it would be like. I am proposing, by contrast, that there is nothing that could count as even beginning to get a grip on what immortality would be like.

[9] An exception is Christine Overall, who touches on Steele's distinction in Overall (2003: 130, 146, 163). More recently, Steele's essay has been fleetingly cited in Bruckner (2012), Tanyi and Karlander (2013), and Kundu (2015).

about when adducing these different kinds of immortality. In the case of their "robust immortal," for instance, Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin do not acknowledge any significant difficulties in conceiving of a life that, by sheer chance, evades all mortal harms, nor in reaching the conclusion that it would be a desirable life to live. It is desirable, they say, because even if the imagined person came to know (by some means that Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin do not think it important to specify) that she would never die, there would be plenty of projects to keep her contentedly occupied, such as raising children and visiting impressive architectural monuments before they crumble to dust. (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin 2014: 369)

Should we accept so readily that we know of what we are expected to conceive? This "robust" immortal—does she live on earth or somewhere else? If she lives on earth, is it the earth that, as astronomers tell us, will become uninhabitable within a billion years or so and will eventually be consumed by the sun? If it is somewhere else—or if we are expected to envisage our heroine evading death by escaping from earth before it gets too hot—are we to picture her as continuing to live in our universe? If so, what about the heat death that Cave mentions? Perhaps the answer is that we should not trouble ourselves with the details but should simply accept that she does, as a matter of stipulated fact, go on living a fulfilling life—forever—as a human being. What I want to say is that, when told to leave the details aside, we should remember Wilkes's warning, that "in a world indeterminately different we do not know what we would want to say about anything."

So we are back to the problem of underdescribed, open-ended thought experiments, a problem that is nicely brought out in a highly pertinent—I am tempted to say "classic"—essay by Roy Holland (1980 [1974]). To someone's claiming to be able to conceive of the sun continuing to exist forever, Holland responds as follows:

> Of course if you think away the conceptual connections by which your idea of the sun is related to your idea of the earth and so on, then you will feel free to entertain any conception you like; for goodness knows what you are then left with—a picture of a shining orb perhaps, which you still call the sun although nothing any longer entitles you to. I shall allow that you can properly call it a sphere because it has a circular shape to it; but apart from that, its nature is now entirely indeterminate, for it is not thought to be composed of anything in particular. It is not thought to have a composition at all in fact, and it is not clear to what logical category anything you said about it would belong. But if all that can strictly be said of it is that it is *round*, then what you have arrived at is an idealization—pure sphericalness or *autos ho kuklos.* (Holland 1980: 203–204)[10]

As with the person who claims to be able to conceive of the sun's existing forever—not just some idealized glowing sphere, but in some sense the same sun that we see in the sky and which we know to be of finite duration—so with those philosophers

[10] The phrase *autos ho kuklos*, "the circle itself," occurs in the *Seventh Letter* attributed to Plato. The author of the letter is distinguishing the pure idea of a circle, as it were, from any circle that might be drawn or otherwise appear in the world. (see *Letter VII*, 342c, in Plato 1997: 1659–1660)

who claim to be conceiving of a life—not just some idealized fairytale life, but a recognizably human one—going on forever. In each case, the conceptual surroundings have been so pared down or left indeterminate that we are handed nothing but a bare abstraction. From this, in the Makropulos debate, we are invited to draw determinate inferences concerning the desirability of the "life" in question. What is liable to ensue—and what has ensued, I am submitting, in the Makropulos debate—is a battle not of reasonably evaluable philosophical arguments but of philosophers' fantasies, adumbrated with only as much detail as is required for the respective philosophers to draw the conclusions that they each want to draw.

To complete this summary of the misgivings that I have about the Makropulos debate, let me mention a fourth problem, which could be called the *mortal values objection*. This is that the debaters frequently overlook the extent to which our comprehension of ourselves—human beings—as mortal informs our understanding of who and what we are and of the values we hold dear. As Martha Nussbaum has eloquently argued (Nussbaum 1994 [1989]), the very values that characteristically pervade and give meaning and direction to our lives are not independent of factors such as our temporal finitude and mortality; these factors are not external to our values but are *constitutive* of "all valuable things' having for us the value that in fact they have." (Nussbaum 1994: 226) The contention here is that, regardless of whether the inevitable prospect of our own death or the deaths of others is occurrently present to consciousness, this prospect constitutes part of the background against which all our important decisions in life are made. It is a structuring feature of our lives—"we build, to a considerable extent, our conceptual lives with the *use* of it" (Van Evra 1971: 174)—and hence to imagine a life even remotely recognizable as ours, imbued with the kinds of values that we hold, is to imagine a life that is mortal.

Are we, then, left with the conclusion that there can be no intelligible talk about immortality or eternal life? That is far from the conclusion that I wish to draw. In my deflationary interventions I have, I hope, always been mindful to differentiate between the ways in which participants in the Makropulos debate use these terms on the one hand and the ways in which the terms are used in religious contexts on the other. The distinction needs to be handled carefully, however, since it would be implausible to insist that there is no overlap between these two contexts, namely the respective contexts of analytic philosophical debate and of religious discourse. Nor should we imply that all religious talk about immortality or eternal life forms a mass that is not itself internally diverse. There are undoubtedly many ways in which these terms find a place in religious language, and it would be unwise to generalize about the sense that the talk has across this full linguistic range. Rather than attempt a broad survey, however, my purpose here is to examine a particular religious conception of eternal life that has been largely neglected in the philosophy of religion, and which stands in contrast to anything centrally considered in the Makropulos debate. It is what we might call a conception of eternal life as a present possession, and it has some intriguing resonances with ideas in the philosophy of time. Although a full exposition would require more space than I have here, I shall

at least begin to explore some aspects of it, with specific attention to its ethical implications.[11]

3 An Alternative Conception of Eternal Life

An assumption shared by parties on both sides of the Makropulos debate is that terms such as "immortality" and "eternal life" are to be understood to mean "living forever" or living a life that is "infinitely long."[12] As I have argued above, however, the assumption that these latter expressions have a clear sense ought not to be taken for granted. If we are seeking more sustained and critical reflection upon the concept of eternal life, one area to explore is the work of Christian theologians, many of whom place in question the assumption that "eternal life" and "living forever" are simply synonymous. A popular source for such theologians has been the Johannine writings of the New Testament, with the Gospel of John central among them. These writings have long been recognized as offering a vision of eternal life as a "present possession" or "present reality"—a quality of life that believers in Christ have "here and now."[13] As Grace Jantzen remarks,

> We are taught, to be sure, that God wishes to bring us to eternal life; but it is a glaring confusion to equate eternal life with endless survival. As the notion of eternal life is used in the Johannine writings, for instance, it is spoken of as a present possession, a quality of life, not a limitless quantity; nor is it something that happens after death but in this present lifetime. (Jantzen 1984: 42)

The challenge for the theologian and for the philosopher of religion is to provide a fuller articulation of what this conception of eternal life as a present possession really amounts to. One way of beginning to spell it out is to consider four themes that are characteristic of theological expositions of the topic.

The *first* theme consists in an acknowledgment of the finality of death, an acknowledgment that, as the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner puts it candidly in a radio interview, "with death it's all over. Life is past, and it won't come again. It won't be given one for a second time." (Rahner 1986a: 238)

The *second* theme concerns the idea that, although one's lifespan is finite in duration, it is that very lifespan—one's biographical lifetime considered as a completed whole—that is eternal. The Reformed theologian Karl Barth, for example, speaks of its being one's natural "this-sided" existence that is glorified in eternal life (Barth 1960: 633), and Karl Rahner emphasizes the "definitiveness," the determinate shape, that life is given by the boundaries of birth and death. (Rahner 1986b: 88) It is this definitive life, replete both with all its experiences and sufferings and with the decisions that influenced its path, that, as Nicholas Lash has put it, "*stands*, eternally." (Lash 1979: 178) There is, in this notion of the eternality of our earthly lives, an ambiguity, for the notion comprises two distinct aspects. On the one hand is the idea that, merely by virtue of existing at all, one's life occupies a

[11] I develop some of the themes of the next two sections more fully in Burley (2015).

[12] See, e.g., Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014: 353), Kagan (2012: 234), Chappell (2009).

[13] See, e.g., Hill (1967: 194), Guthrie (1981: 614, 643), Dodd (1968: 149).

determinate period in the history of the universe, and inasmuch as the entire history of the universe stands in an eternal relation to God, our lives, as constituent elements of that history, partake of its eternity. On the other hand is the idea that to live an eternal life is for one's life to take on a specific character, one that exhibits certain qualities of faith, hope, and love. It is with reference to this latter sense that theologians often speak of eternal life as "a matter of the mode of one's existence in relation to God, as that calibre of relation shows itself in a new pattern for the whole of life." (Tanner 2005: 49)

The two aspects of the above ambiguity are interrelated, for it is, in part, by recognizing the eternality of one's life in the first sense that one is prompted to seek the kind of ethical and spiritual transformation expressed in the second sense. In other words, coming to see that one's life stands in an eternal relation to God is, as Rahner intimates, to admit that one's responsibility for action is something "from which you cannot run away, that you cannot shake off." (Rahner 1986b: 88) It is thus also to see that one ought to strive to purify one's life and motivations, which, for the Christian, involves striving to imitate Christ while at the same time acknowledging that it is only by the grace of God that this can be done. Needless to say, none of this constitutes an argument for anyone to become a Christian who does not already see truth in the Christian message; it is merely an articulation of the conceptual connections internal to the Christian perspective between regarding one's life as already eternal in one sense and the need to strive for eternal life in the other, more explicitly ethical, sense.

The *third* theme brings out more vividly the ethical, life-transformative, dimension of what it means to have eternal life: it is the characterization of eternal life as participation in God's eternity, with the defining feature of that participation being active engagement in the love of God as epitomized in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Insofar as one's life becomes a vehicle for that divine love, it becomes an expression of the eternal: "God abides in us and … we abide in him." (1 John 4:12–13)[14]

The *fourth*, and last, of the themes that I am highlighting here consists in a transformed conception of death, a conception that has already been alluded to in Rahner's notion of death as that which, in its finality, furnishes life with a definitiveness that cannot be evaded. Theologians who, like Rahner, espouse the idea of eternal life as something present are apt to replace talk of a life *after* or *subsequent to* death with talk of the achievement or fulfillment of eternal life *in* or *through* death. "We must say: through death—not after it," Rahner insists, "*there is* (not: begins to take place) the achieved definitiveness of the freely matured existence of man" (Rahner 1966: 348; cf. Lash 1979: 174); "eternal life … according to Christian theology, takes place at the moment of death." (Rahner 1975: 176) In the context of some of the other aspects of Rahner's theology that I have mentioned above, we see that what he means by saying that eternal life is achieved through or at the moment of death is that it is death that rounds off one's life, thereby consolidating and determining it as a completed whole with a distinctive ethical and religious character. It thus makes sense to describe eternal life as taking place "at the moment of death" only to the extent that one is willing to accept the

[14] *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version* (1971). Cf. Ratzinger (2007: xxi): "The relationship to that which is eternal, viz., remaining in communion with Him, is partaking in His eternity."

contention that one's pre-mortem life—which is, on this conception, the only life one has—is itself eternal.

4 Issues with the Idea of Eternal Life as a Present Possession

There are, no doubt, many questions and conundrums that the condensed exposition provided above raises concerning the idea of eternal life as a present possession. Although it would be overambitious to try to resolve all those issues here, I can at least begin to consider a couple of the most pressing. Perhaps the most obvious and immediate difficulty that many readers will have is that of seeing how the conception under discussion amounts to a conception of *eternal* life at all; for it might seem that all it offers is the standard claim—uncontroversial among those who lack any religious commitment—that human life begins at birth (or at conception, or somewhere in between) and ends at death, combined with various injunctions to live one's life according to particular values, the values associated with the Christian theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. To call this "eternal life," it might be thought, is to characterize eternal life in a thoroughly reductive way, a way that reduces a metaphysical concept—the concept of eternity—to something merely ethical.

One means of responding to the charge of reductionism is to develop further the idea of its being one's life as a whole that is eternal, and this can be done by drawing upon certain considerations from the philosophy of time. Recent debates in the metaphysics of time, with precursors stretching back to ancient Greece, have focused largely upon variations of two rival theories, popularly known as presentism and eternalism respectively, the former being the view "that only present things exist" (Crisp 2007: 90) or "only the present is real" (Noonan 2013: 219) and the latter being the view "that all times and their contents," including those that would normally be designated past and future as well as those that are present, "are equally real." (Mozersky 2013: 176) Most eternalists also accept the view, associated with the "B-theory" of time, that what is commonly understood as the passage or flow of time is merely apparent and not ultimately real—a product of our modes of perception rather than an objective feature of the universe. (Le Poidevin 2015)[15] From the conjunction of these two contentions—namely, the contentions that all times are equally real and that the flow of time is merely apparent—a conception of the universe emerges that is equivalent or closely analogous to the model of spacetime famously devised by Hermann Minkowski (1918 [1909]), according to which "space-in-itself" and "time-in-itself" are replaced by a manifold whose four dimensions are neither precisely spatial nor precisely temporal. Given that the manifold itself cannot be said to be in time, it becomes tempting to characterize its reality as "eternal," and this notion of an "eternal manifold" (Williams 1951: 470) bears an intriguing affinity to how certain theologians over the centuries, at least from Anselm of Canterbury onwards, have sought to conceptualize the universe as known by God. (see, e.g., Rogers 2007)

[15] Cf. the seminal article by D. C. Williams (1951).

Without needing to enter into the fraught debate over whether presentism or eternalism (or neither of them) is ultimately true, we can discern that the affinity I have just mentioned offers a potential bridge of understanding for secular philosophers who are trying to come to grips with the theological idea of the eternality of a finite human life. For if God's relationship to the universe is conceived of as one in which, "From the divine perspective everything is simply 'there' in eternity" (Rogers 2008: 181), then we have something close to the idea of an eternal manifold in which the totality of things and events is spread out in an "ordered extension" (Williams 1951: 463); and if our lives are among the extended series of events that is "simply 'there'," then there is a sense in which they partake of the eternality of the whole. Indeed, certain proponents of the four-dimensional model of the universe have expressed the point by observing that, in the light of such a model, "death is not the deletion of a person's existence. It is an event, merely, that marks the outer limit of that person's extension in one (timelike) spatio-temporal direction." (Lockwood 2005: 53–54; cf. Le Poidevin 1996: 145–146) Although such philosophers tend not to take the further, theological, step of describing this four-dimensional universe, with our lives as integral components, as standing in an eternal relation to God, their conception of the eternal reality of our finite lives echoes the theological notion of eternal life as a present possession—as a characteristic of the life that each of us is now living. In this respect, the philosophy of time can assist in showing that there is no good reason for supposing that the latter theological notion has merely replaced metaphysics with ethics; rather, we can see it as being infused with both metaphysical and ethical elements.

With regard to the ethical element itself, however, we might wonder how any particular ethical values follow merely from the idea that one's life has a determinate place in the "eternal manifold" of universal history. The fact is that there are no values that *necessarily* accompany this idea; instead, what we find is that the mode of contemplation of one's life that such an idea makes possible can facilitate a transformation of values, but not in isolation from a more pervasive worldview—in this particular case, the worldview constituted by Christian religious thought and practice. More specifically, what the idea of the eternal reality of one's life makes possible is the thought that one's decisions and actions—what one makes of one's life—are, in a sense, not merely fleeting and ephemeral, but have a depth and meaning that warrant being termed eternal.

As we have seen, Rahner in particular emphasizes the extent to which recognizing the eternality of one's existence brings with it—or, more precisely, consists in—a recognition of one's moral responsibility, which he calls an "absolute" or "ultimate" responsibility. (Rahner 1986b: 88) By expressing it in these terms he is drawing a contrast between, on the one hand, an attitude characterized by sincere moral seriousness, which conceives of the moral life as having the profoundest importance, and on the other hand, an alternative attitude according to which the importance of the moral life is merely relative. The understanding of one's eternal life as temporally finite lends piquancy to the moral life by accentuating the felt exigency in relation to morally pertinent decisions. As a number of theologians, as well as philosophers, have observed, a heightened awareness of death's imminence can prompt us to treat "each moment, each

relationship, each person, with utmost seriousness" and to regard them as mattering in ways that would be liable to be diluted by the assumption that one's present life is merely an "antechamber" to some endless hereafter. (Lash 1979: 180) In short, "if death is a limit, this gives a significance and urgency to our choices which they would not otherwise have" (Jantzen 1984: 36); and if death's limit is envisaged as the cessation of the possibility of any further internal transformation of a life that is eternal, the significance and urgency are made all the more resounding.

As I have indicated already, how one acts upon the recognition of the eternal significance of one's decisions and actions is determined not by the recognition alone but by a nexus of factors, crucial among them being the system of values in the context of which one encounters the idea of the eternality of one's life in the first place. For the Christian, to view one's life as eternal is to strive to be receptive to, and to become a vehicle for, the redeeming love of God as embodied in the life and ministry of Christ. That is how the specifically Christian conception of eternal life is to be understood. From a non-Christian standpoint, viewing one's life as eternal leaves open the possibility of other understandings, other ways of conceptualizing and enacting the ethics of eternality.[16]

5 Concluding Remarks

There is, inevitably, a great deal more that could be said about the Christian idea, deriving principally from the Johannine writings, of eternal life as a present possession. I have not, for example, entered in this article into debates over whether such an eternal life is to be regarded as *exclusively* present or whether, as many theologians and New Testament scholars have argued, the eternal life of the present is merely a "foretaste" of something more enduring.[17] Nor have I discussed the question of how, if an exclusively present construal is to be advanced, the resurrection, both of Christ and of those who believe in him, is to be conceptualized. Addressing these questions would require a more sustained engagement with competing Christian eschatologies than I have space for here, though I do intend to take that engagement further in subsequent work.[18]

What I have aimed to do in this article is, first, to reiterate and defend my reasons for regarding the Makropulos debate as lacking a coherent conceptual footing, and second, by beginning to explore a particular religious conception of eternal life, to exemplify how careful consideration of the religious and ethical perspectives within which the language of eternal life and immortality has its most natural home may engender an appreciation of the richness and complexity of such language that tends, for the most part, to be absent from the Makropulos debate. For the purpose

[16] One such alternative would be Nietzsche's call for "self-affirmation" in the face of the "eternal recurrence." (see esp. Nietzsche 2006: parts 3 and 4) Pursuing this further here would take us too far afield, but for relevant discussion see, e.g., Löwith (1997) and Hatab (2005).

[17] See, e.g., Baillie (1934: 208, 246, 251), Mitton (1963: 294–295), Gacka (2009: 89).

[18] In the meantime, I might mention that relevant suggestions are to be found in the "realized eschatology" developed by C. H. Dodd (e.g., Dodd 1961) and in Rudolf Bultmann's "existentialist" exegeses of the Johannine writings. (e.g., Bultmann 1955: 3–92)

of this second task, I selected the idea of eternal life as a present possession partly because it has been neglected in the philosophy of religion as well as in the more secular milieu of the Makropulos debate, but also because it places in question the common assumption, prevalent in the latter debate, that terms such as "immortality" and "eternal life" must denote a life that goes on "forever" or is "infinitely long."

I have sought to argue not for the truth of the Christian conception of eternal life as a present possession but for its coherence and intelligibility. By doing so, I have not sought to deny that there may be many other equally viable conceptions of eternal life, or of close analogues of that notion, in other religious traditions, including other forms of Christianity. For those philosophers, and indeed theoretical physicists, who are able to make sense of the model of the universe as an "eternal manifold," I have proposed that this model offers a potential bridge of understanding for coming to grasp what theologians might be driving at when they speak of God's perspective on the world being one in which everything—our lives included—is "simply 'there'." Where the ethical significance comes in is in the recognition that if our lives are "there," eternally, then so too are all the thoughts and deeds, both the good and the bad, that constitute those lives; they do not dissolve into nothingness upon our demise, for death, according to this picture, "is simply one of the temporal limits of our lives." (Le Poidevin 1996: 146) What conclusions one draws from this about how one ought to live cannot be established, I have suggested, on the basis of the claim about the eternality of one's life alone; it requires the infusion of that claim with an elaborated system of values, one instance of which is that of Christian ethics. I hope, however, that enough has been said to indicate that the claim itself is not without profound philosophical interest, as it illustrates one sense in which our lives, though finite in duration, can nevertheless be said to be "eternally real."

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